Political Party and Educational Researcher Support for Educational Policies

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Show of Hands

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This study reports the results of two samples to similar survey items. A sub-sample of the general public responded to polling items by using a smartphone app. The other sample was made up of academics, educational researchers with opinions about school problems and policies. The survey items were organized around the general areas of: Goals of education, judgments regarding school performance, teacher preparation, teacher evaluation, problems with education, funding of education, policies, and change agents. The comparisons and conflicts of opinions identified in this study often get played out in the political policy arena; however, the Democrats from the general public were more in line with the experts in educational research.

Robert Slavin (2002) declared that "our children deserve the best educational programs, based on the most rigorous evidence we can provide." However, educational researchers have long bemoaned how policies and practice ignore the research and the voices of those closest to studying effective instruction. Take a basic policy like grade level retention for poor performance (see David, 2008 for a brief review), there are a plethora of studies that come to the conclusion that it is very detrimental to the child. Yet, states continue to enact policies mandating retention for test failure (often as early as the third grade). Although academics may write reports or even testify in hearings, their voice is seldom collected in a poll as with the general public. Seldom, if ever is there a reported consensus.

Two important findings from the 2013 PDK/Gallup Poll on the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools involved confusion over the Common Core State Standards and a growing lack of confidence in standardized testing (Bushaw). The 2014 survey found the majority of the American public did not support the policies that they believed were created or promoted by federal policymakers, and there was continued support for charter schools, but continued confusion over the nature of those schools (Bushaw). Opinions matter and they matter even more in education because of the important roll that politics plays. Although politicians may not care about educational researchers, a critical mass of the electorate can sway elected policymakers. Current policies focused on privatization and conservative social agendas may be slowed by the public. Although politicians may listen with their wallets, they also listen to voices of the constituents that elect them. So, if there is a strong move against testing or charter schools by the general public, it can make a difference in policy.

This study considered and compared the opinions of two groups. One used a real-time phone app to gauge opinions about education problems and policies from a unique sample of the general public. The other sample was made up of academics, educational researchers, who chose to express their informed opinions regarding the policies and practices that affect children's learning. How these opinions break down interms of political party will help identify and potentially shape the education landscape our children navigate in school.

Method

The App

Show of Hands is a free and anonymous smartphone app and web polling system. The real-time polls cover a variety of topics. The app was launched in 2009 and has been downloaded over 300,000 and has recorded over 75 million votes as of August 2013 (Wikipedia, 2014). Results are available geographically and by a variety of demographics variables, such as gender, age, income, religion, and political party. Users may also post comments related to the polls.

The founder and President of *Show of Hands* agreed to post questions regarding educational policy approximately once a month. He also modified items to meet the framework of the app, for clarification, and to eliminate jargon. One challenge was reducing most polling items to only two choices. The adaptation process and his reflections will be included in the paper.

As might be expected with any technology-based survey, the sample for the app is not representative of the population of the United States (see Table 1). Compared to census data, the app sample had an over-representation of males, Republicans and Libertarians, higher incomes, and Whites. Considering the technological nature of the polling tool, this could be expected.

Table 1. Demographics for the United States and the Show of Hands App.

	United States	Show of Hands
Gender		
Male	49	58
Female	51	42
Political Party		
Independent	42	25
Democrat	31	28
Republican	25	31
Libertarian		9
Income		
< %50,000	73	38
> $100,000	7	30
Race		
White	78	71
Black	13	7
Hispanic	17	9
Highest Education		
High School	57	15
Bachelors Degree	28	24

The Academics

A survey was developed through the collaboration of members of an invitation only group of educational researchers (2013), and the final version began with two open-ended items followed by 15 select-response items. Educational researchers were then invited to complete the online, anonymous survey posted on a mid-western university's Qualtric site. Responses were solicited by email to members of the Invisible College for Research on Teaching, the Mid-Western Educational Research Association, and education faculty at Ball State University, Columbia University, Harvard University, Michigan State University, Pennsylvania State University, Stanford University and Vanderbilt University. In addition, postcards soliciting participation were distributed at the 2014 annual meetings of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education and the American Educational Research Association. The "academics" represented a self-selected group of educational researchers interested in educational policy, not a sample representative of all educational researchers (N = 100). This represented the first and only effort to capture a consensus from this group of experts in education.

Results and Discussion

The survey items were organized around the general areas of:
Goals of education, judgments regarding school performance, teacher preparation, teacher evaluation, problems with education, funding of education, policies, and change agents. Results from the recent PDK/Gallup poll are also presented where appropriate.

Goals of Education.

Researchers supported focusing on the goal of developing an educated, informed and thinking citizenry over the creation of an advanced and skilled occupational workforce (65% compared to 5%, see Figure 1). Overall, 69% of the app sample chose the thinking citizenry goal compared to 31% choosing skilled workforce as a goal. There was a significant difference based on political party with Democrats most supportive of the educated citizenry and Republicans least supportive ($p < .01$, see Figure 2). This goal was reinforced by support for focusing in critical thinking skills compared to content knowledge (61% compared to 1% for academics, see Figure 3). The PDK poll showed that 80% of public strongly agree with teaching students critical thinking skills. All of the app demographic groups chose thinking skills by over 75% compared to content knowledge with the overall average being 83% (see Figure 4). This is in contrast to policies emphasizing content knowledge in standards and teacher preparation programs. The strongest supporters of critical thinking were Libertarians, followed by Democrats, with the least support coming from Republicans.

Figure 1. Academics - In general, what should be the goal of K-12 education?

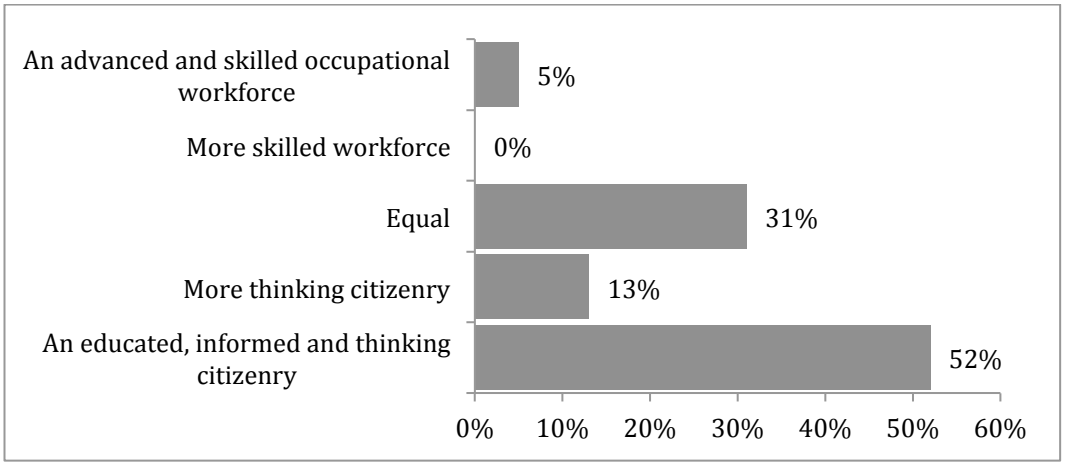


Figure 2. App - Which should be the "higher" priority for K-12 education in the US: creating an educated and thinking citizenry, or creating a competitive and skilled workforce?

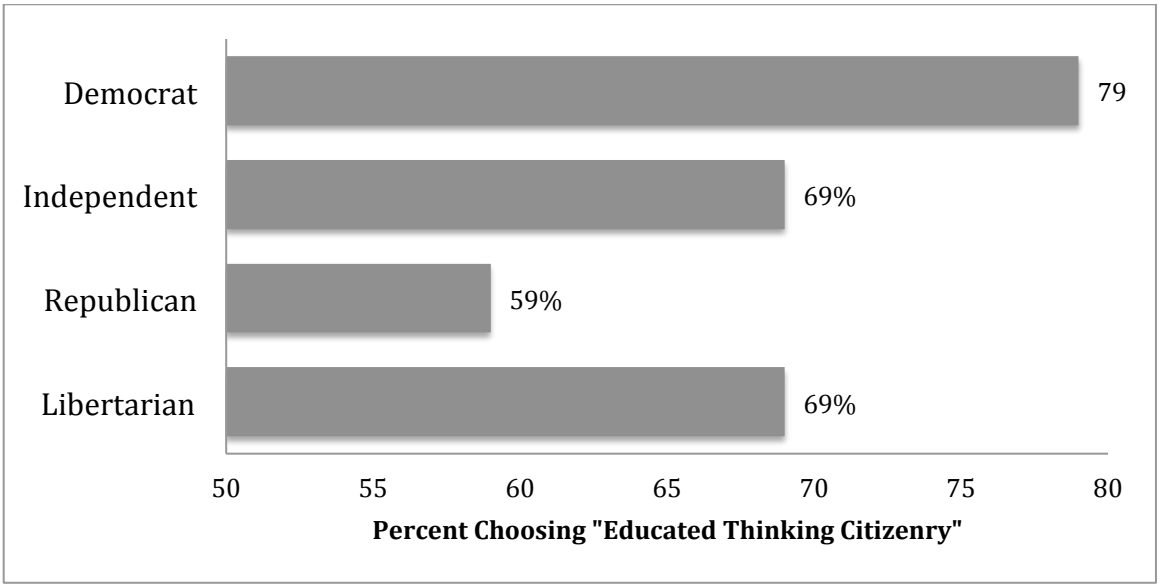


Figure 3. Academics - What should schools focus more on increasing in students?

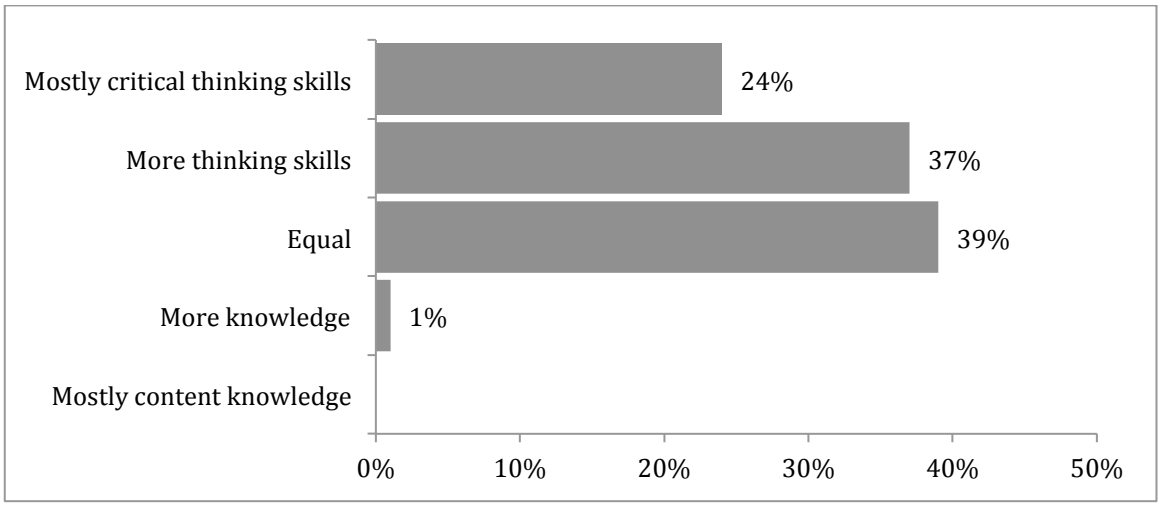
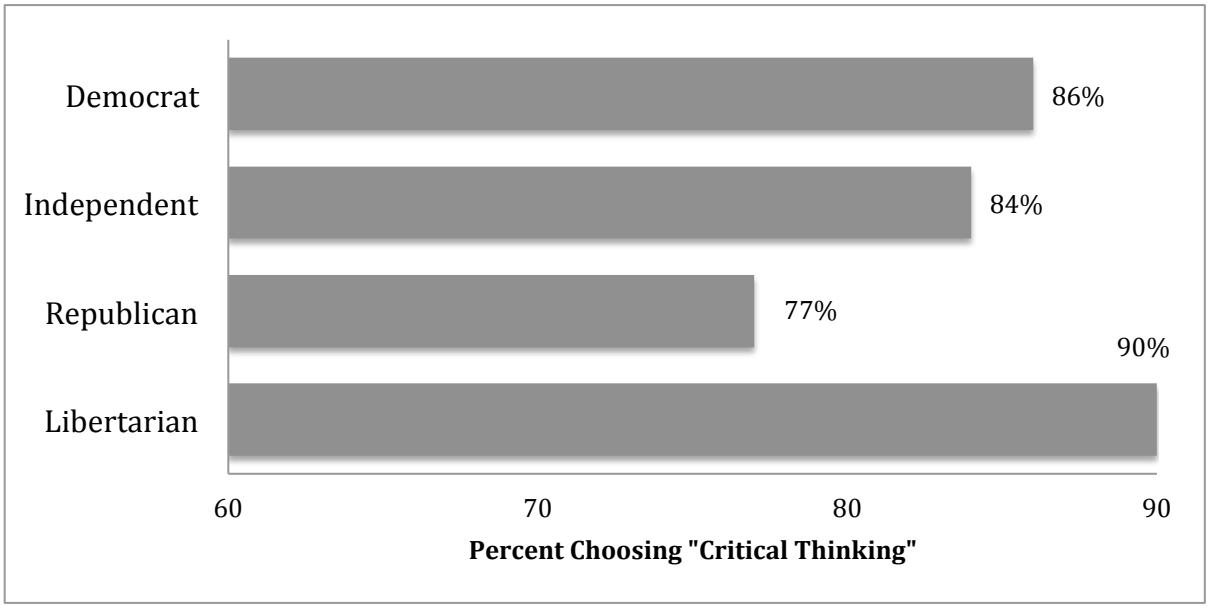


Figure 4. App - What should schools focus more on increasing: subject matter content knowledge or critical thinking skills?



School Performance.

One of the most reported finding from the annual PDK/Gallup polls is how the general grades the nation's schools (see Figure 5). The app sample mirrored the results from the last PDK poll (2013). Academics gave public schools high marks with 44% giving schools an A or B, and only 1% assigning an F. This was in contrast to the general public, where only 19% gave the schools an A or a B, and 6% gave them an F.

If the public is overly critical of the public schools, people are less like to support funding or efforts to empower teachers. If a particular political party is less positive regarding our schools that can be reflected in policy agendas. Based on the app sample, Democrats gave schools the highest marks, and the Libertarians the lowest grades (see Figure 6).

Figure 5. PDK, Academics, and App letter grades for our nation's public schools.

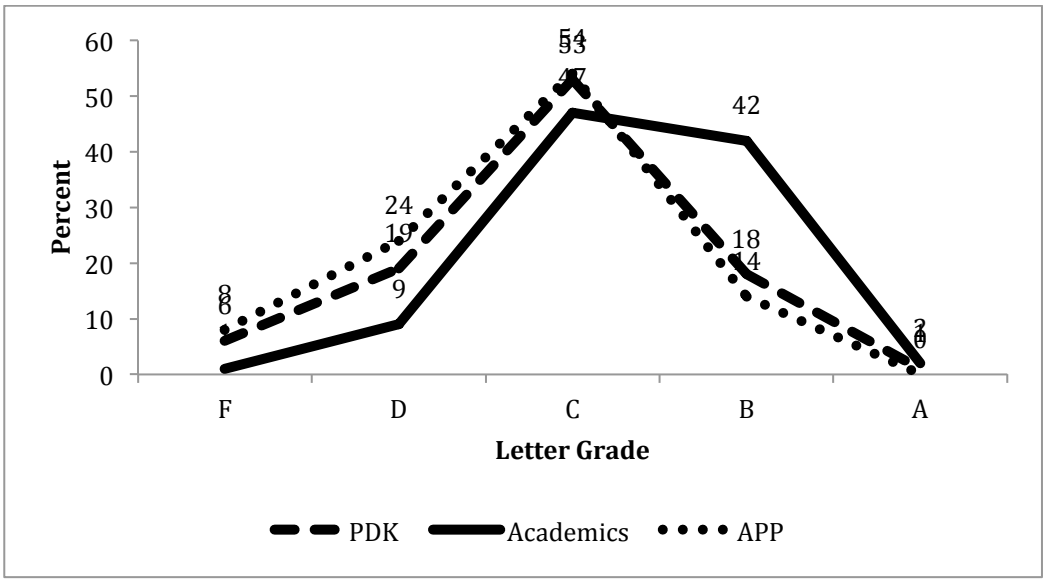
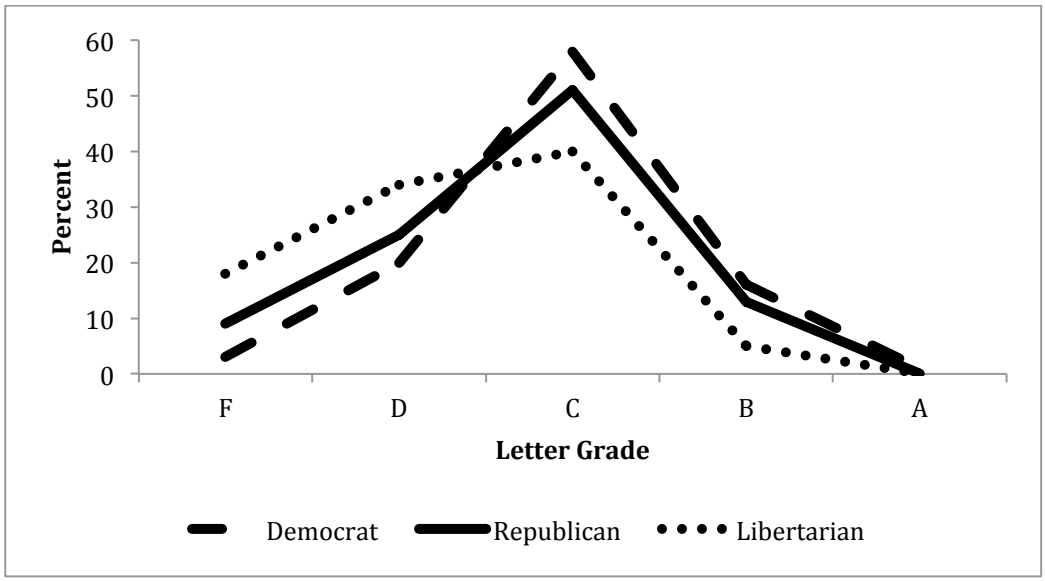


Figure 6. App - Letter grades for nation's public schools by political party.



When asked, on the whole if American public schools did a good job, two-thirds of the app sample said no, as did the majority of every group (see Figure 7). When asked about the poverty gap between students, the app sample was not very optimistic. Only 27% thought the schools could overcome the economic hardships that affect achievement (see Figure 8). Only Democrats had a majority believing schools could compensate for poverty. The policy implications are obvious. If schools cannot overcome the effects of poverty, why invest in efforts to do so?

Figure 7. App- "On the whole, do you think the American public school syste does a good job?"

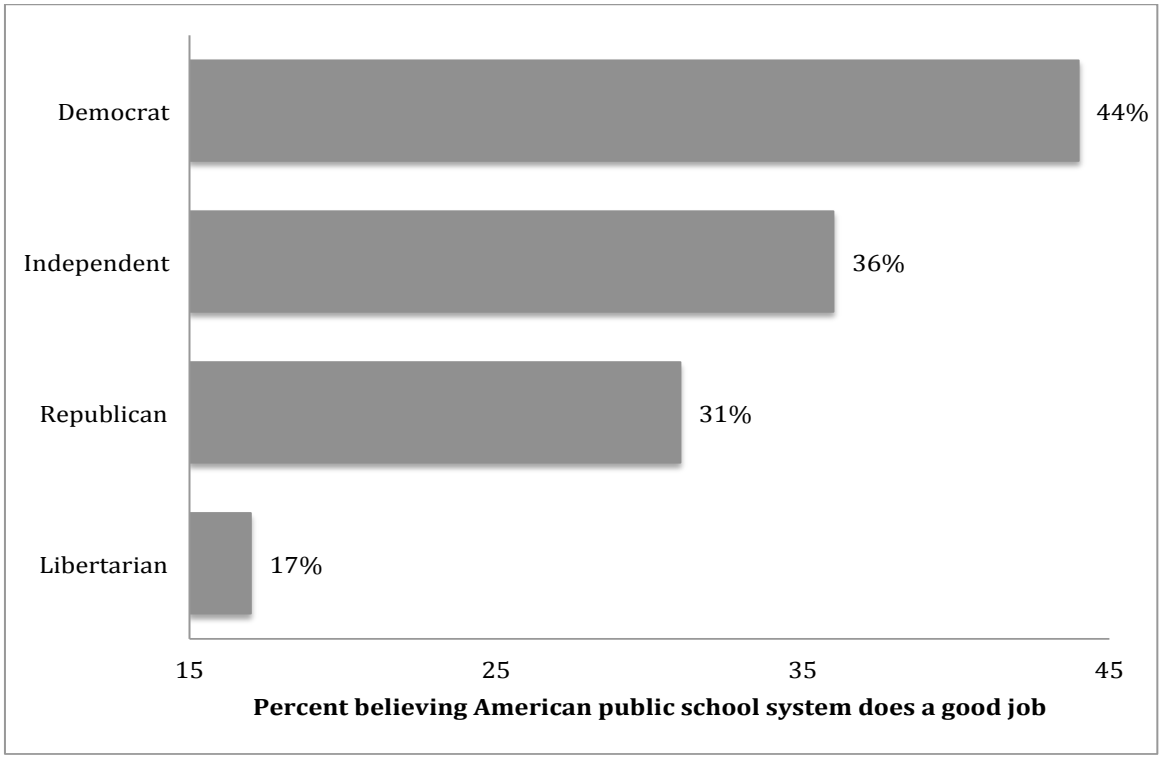
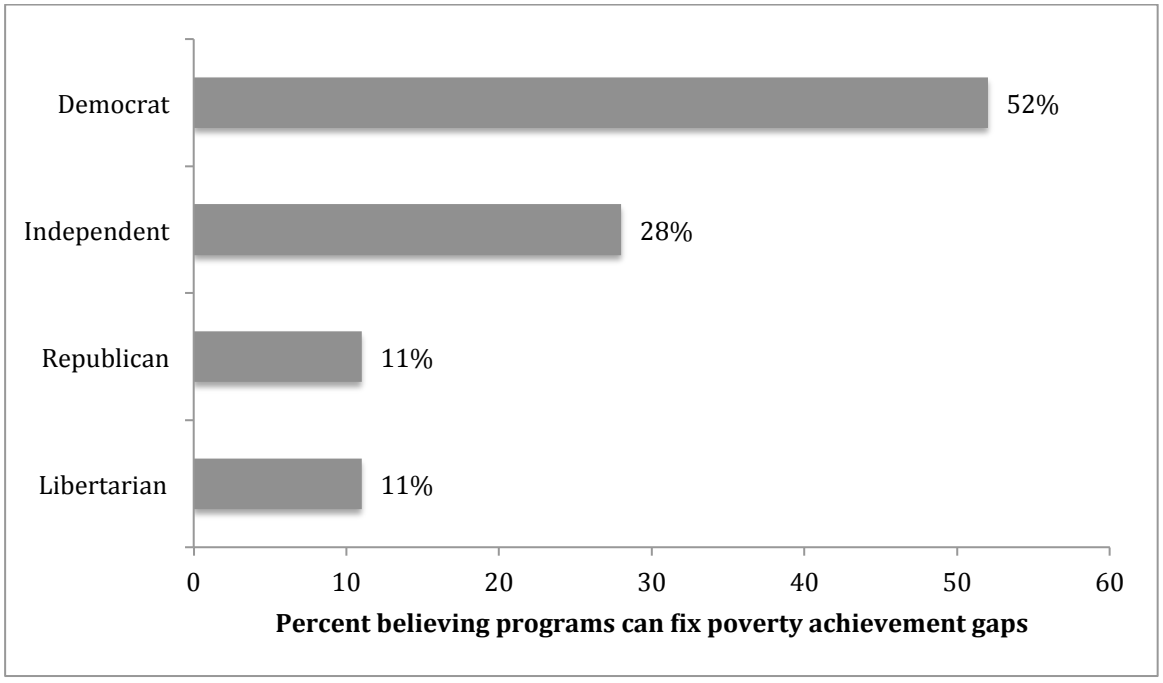


Figure 8. App- "Most poor children do worse in school than their higher-income classmates, even when given access to the same educational resources. Can public programs fix this problem?"



Teacher Preparation.

Concerning the cause of ineffective teaching, the academics sided with the research that suggests the issue is with pedagogy, not lack of content knowledge (see Figure 9). Fifty-eight percent of the researchers indicated pedagogy was more of a problem, compared to 4% identifying lack of content knowledge. When the question of which presents more of a struggle for ineffective teachers (revised for app), the app sample also agreed that teaching skills (81%) were more of an issue than content knowledge (see Figure 10).

Figure 9. Academics-What is the bigger cause of ineffective teaching?

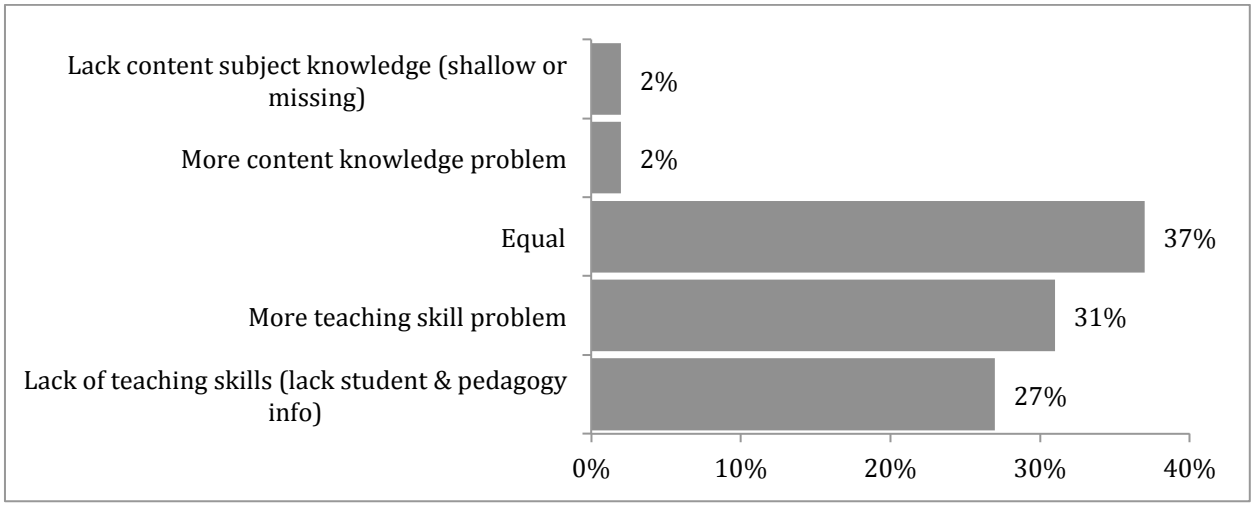
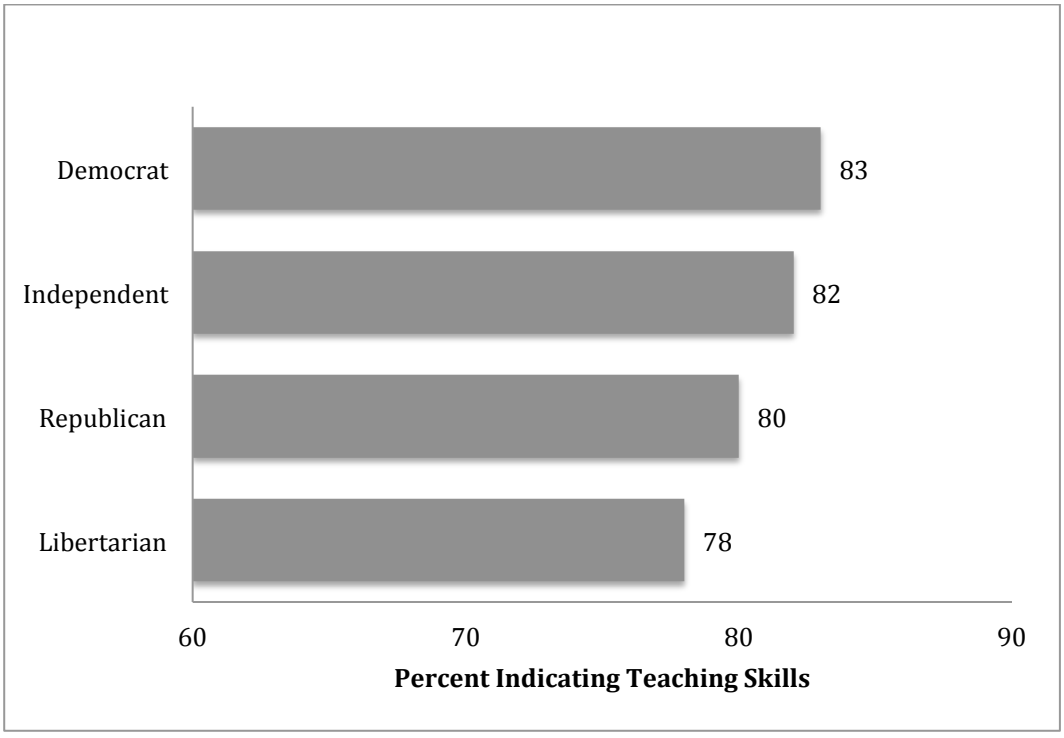


Figure 10. App - Which do you think is the more common struggle of ineffective K-12 teachers: lack of strong teaching skills (classroom management, communication, etc), or lack of strong subject matter knowledge?"



When posed the question of how teachers should be trained, the academics supported the traditional college degree programs, rather than shortened alternative programs after a non-education degree (see Figure 11). However, the app sample did not share that view (see Figure 12). Only Democrats chose the traditional 4-year teacher education program over half of the time. This points to a serious difference in understanding that is driving teacher education. If teachers need pedagogical skills and the ability to facilitate critical thinking over content knowledge, a degree in content and an abbreviated teacher training effort would not seem optimal.

Figure 11. Academics - Which is the better way for a person to be prepared for a career as a teacher?

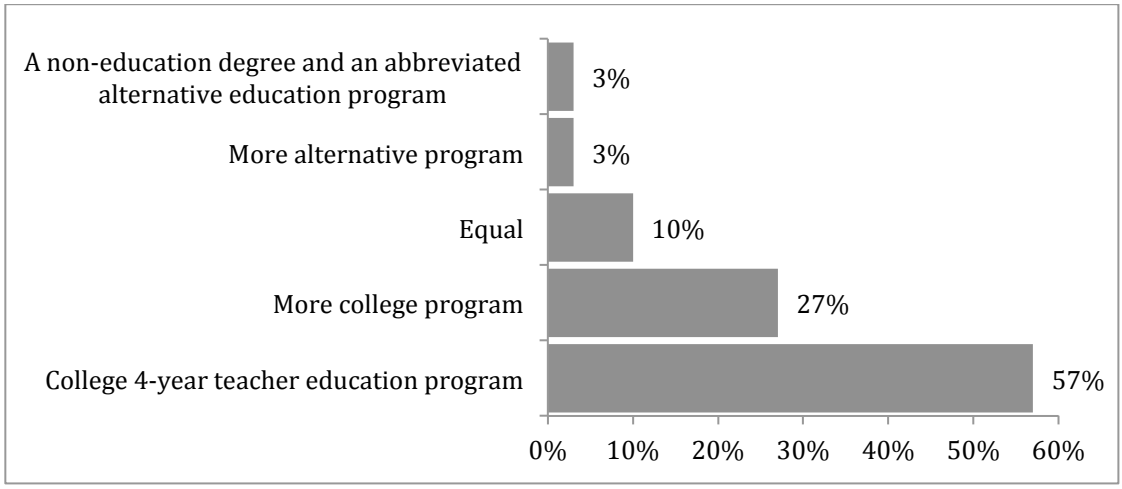
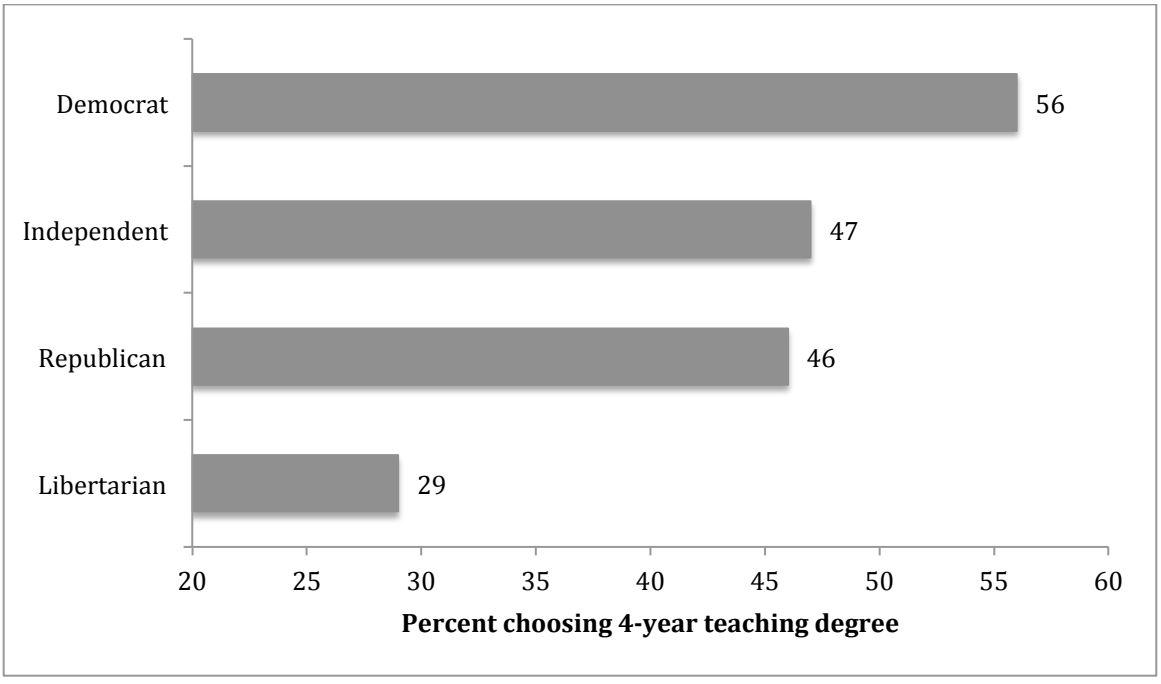


Figure 12. App - "Which is the better way for a person to be prepared for a career as a teacher: a 4-year degree in teaching, or a 4-year degree in another field followed by a short teacher-training program?"



Teacher Evaluation.

The academics indicated that poor student background has a much bigger impact on poor student achievement than poor teaching (see Figure 13). This view was also supported by 76% of the app sample with a great deal of consistency across all groups. Because of the variation in student background, academics supported schools and teachers being held to different criteria based on the nature of their students (see Figure 14). The app sample did not draw the same conclusion with only 46% supporting adjusted expectations and accountability based on past student performance (see Figure 15).

The academics indicated that teacher pay should be reflective of evaluations of teaching practices and skills, rather than the standardized test scores of their students (88% compared to 3%, see Figure 15). The app sample agreed with the academics with 73% choosing teaching methods rather than test scores. However, political party differences existed with more support for teaching methods over test scores coming from Democrats (see Figure 16). This is in conflict with current policies focusing on increasing the use of student testing for teacher evaluations.

Figure 13. Academics - Which has a bigger influence on poor student achievement?

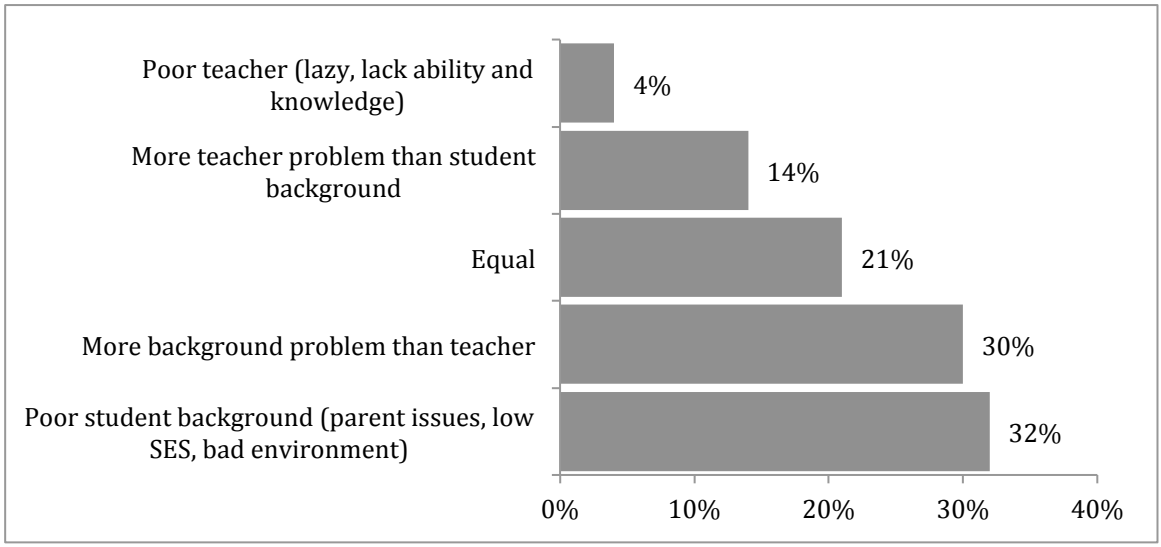


Figure 14. Academics - How should expectations and accountability be considered?

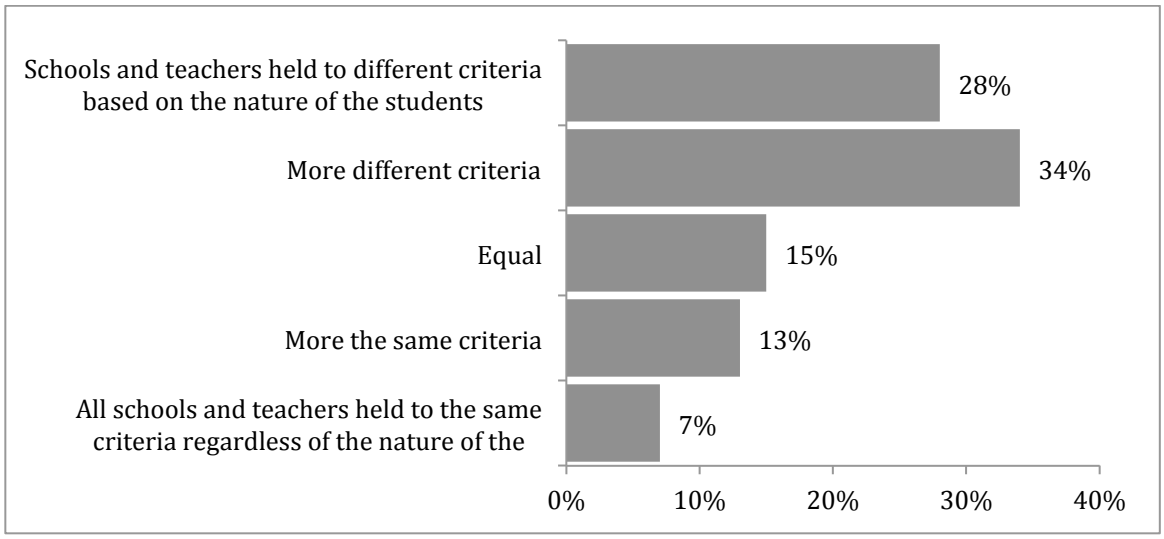


Figure 15. App - Should expectations and accountability for schools and teachers (expected student test scores, graduation rates, etc.) be adjusted based upon past performances of the students in that school/classroom, or should they be consistent for all?

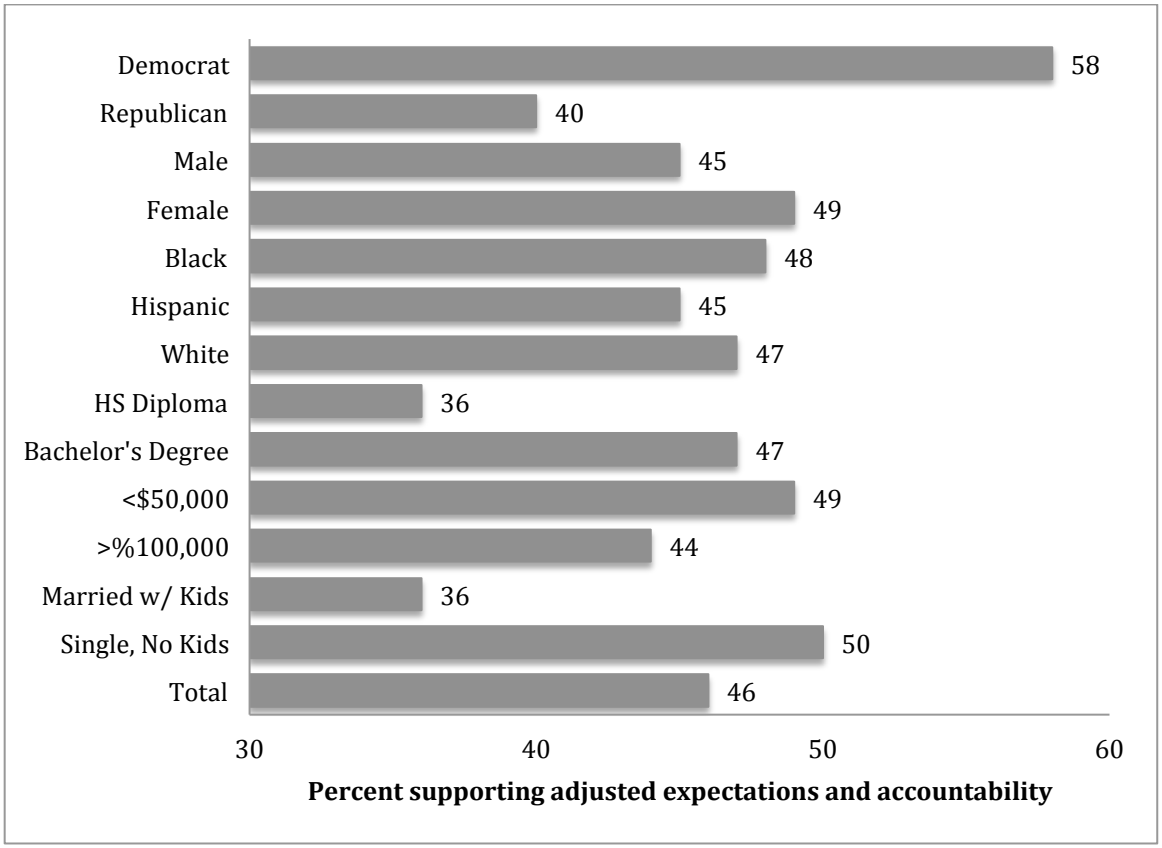


Figure 16. Academics - What should teacher pay be based on?

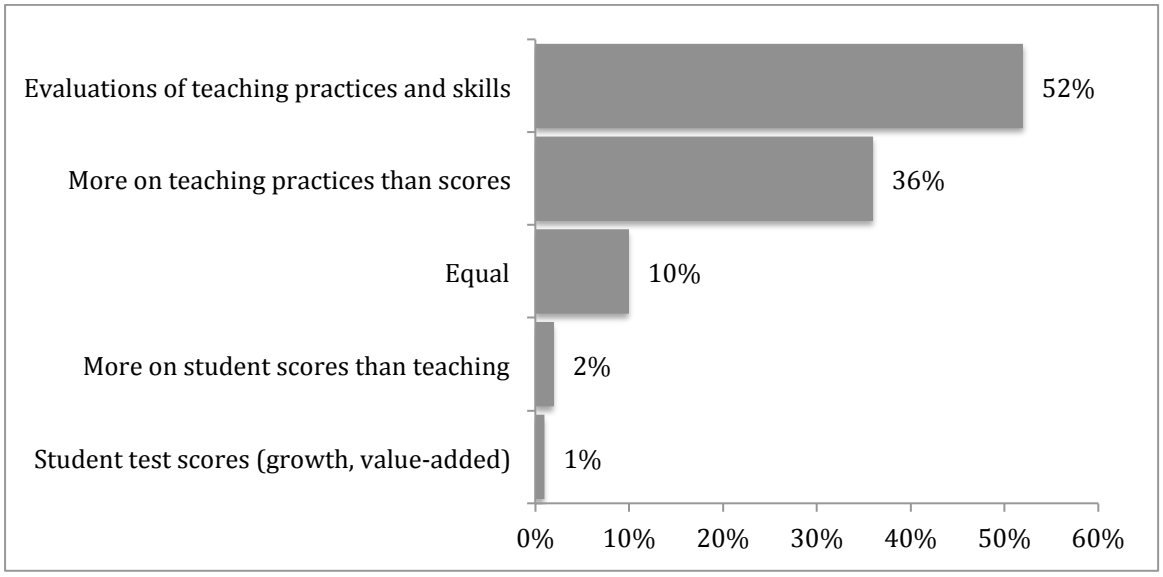
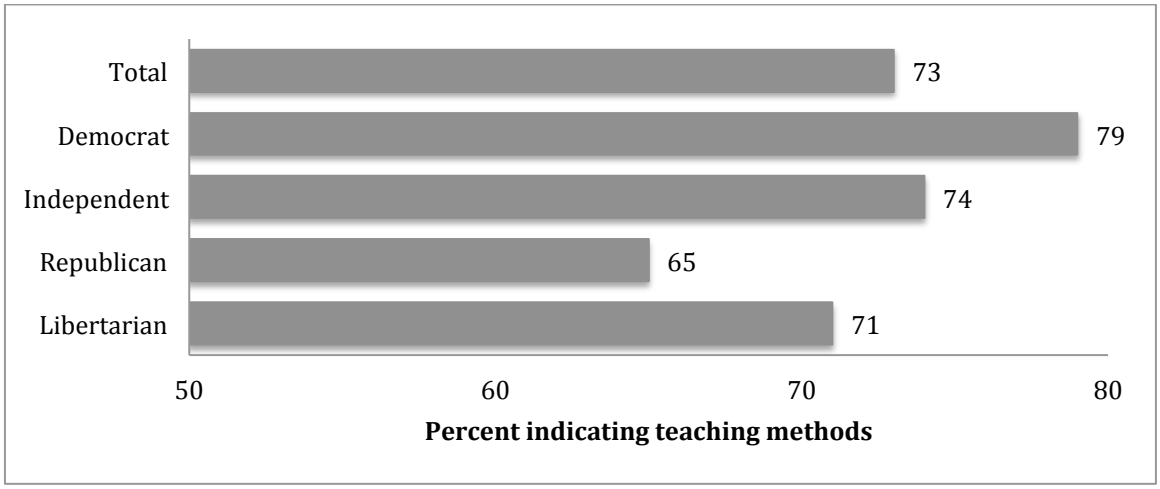


Figure 17. App - If teachers were paid based upon job performance, should it be weighted more on their teaching methods and practices, or their students' overall test scores?"



Problems in Education.

Academics and the general public indicated lack of financial support was the biggest problem public schools face (based on the choices from the PDK poll, Figure 18). One of the biggest discrepancies based on political party was the app agreement with "The biggest problem with public education in America is that we are not investing enough money in our schools and kids." Seventy percent of the Democrats agreed with the statement compared to only 25 percent of the Republicans (see Figure 19). When asked if we should spend more money on public education, the party difference remained the same (see Figure 20) Obviously, this difference impacts policy on all levels.

Figure 18. PDK and Academics - Which of these do you think is the biggest problem for public schools?

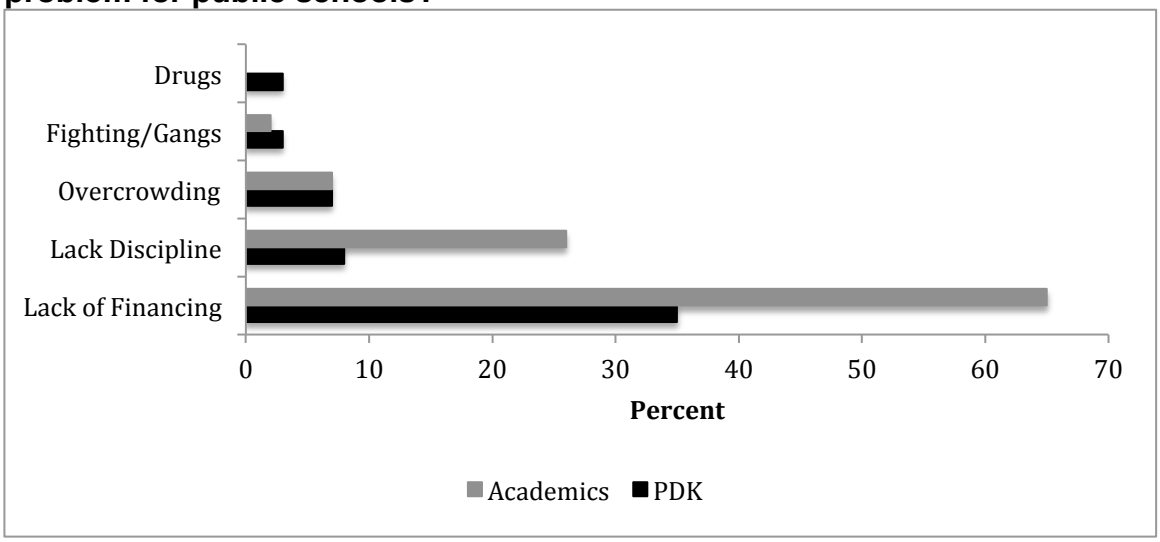


Figure 19. App - The biggest problem with public education in America is that we are not investing enough money in our schools and kids.

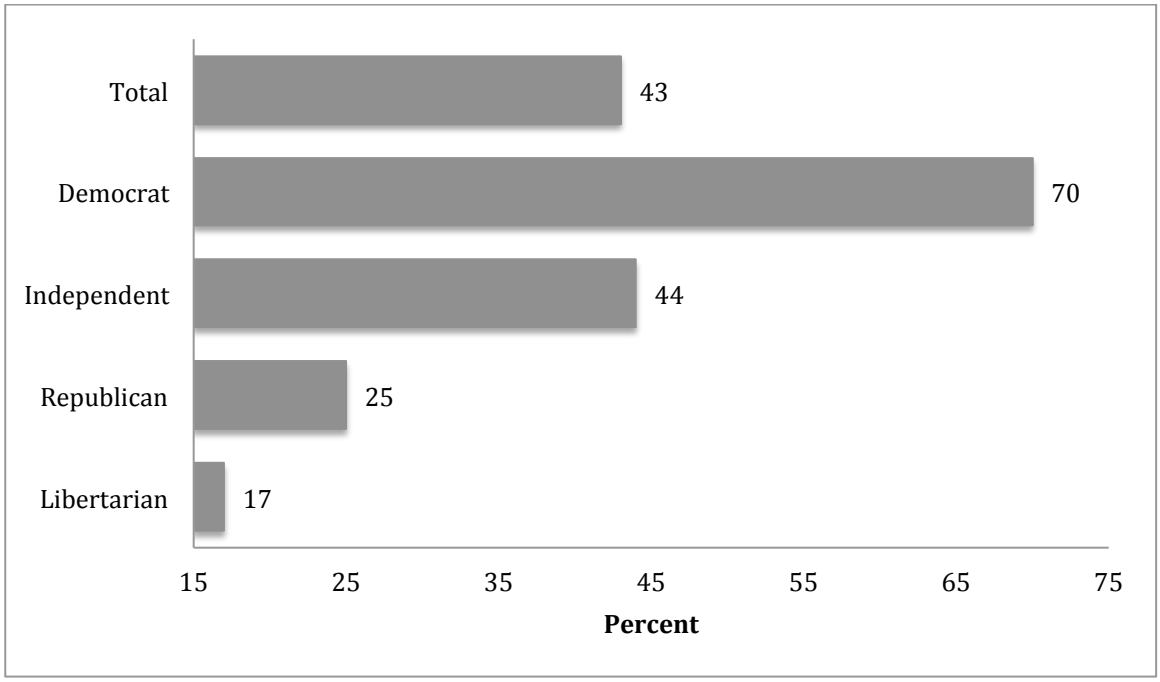
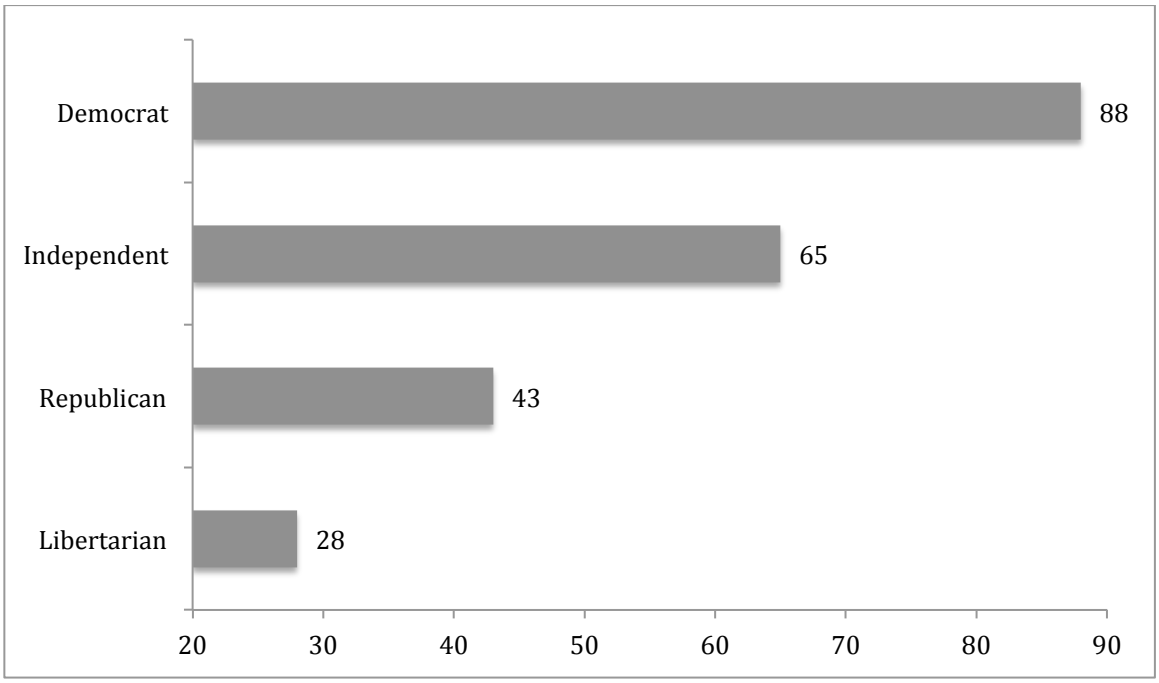


Figure 20. App- "Should we spend more money on public education?"



Conclusion

Education and politics cannot be separated. Although it would not be surprising to find that academics lean left politically, this study did not simply identify the political party of academics. The Pew Research Center did this when they found that only six percent of scientists were Republicans (2009). However, just as the Republican Party is at odds with scientists' views on climate change and evolution, they do not tend to support educational researchers' views on policy matters.

This study confirmed greater support from Democrats for policies endorsed by educational researchers. However, party politics and educational policy are not absolutes. In 2012, Glenda Ritz upset Tony Bennett to be elected Superintendent of Public Instruction for the state of Indiana. As a Democrat, she received more votes than the elected Republican governor of a red state. In 2014, Valarie Wilson, "a true friend of public schools," won Georgia State Superintendent of Education over Alisha Thomas Morgan, who was supported by a hedge fund group, a pro-voucher group, and Michelle Rhee's StudentsFirst (Ravitch, 2014). These were not just elections of people; they were a poll of policies and visions. In these two cases, the candidates who more closely matched the views of academics won. The same may or may not be true in next year's elections, but the general trend concerning political parties and educational policies are clear.

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